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Security Information

Excerpts from discussion of Reports Writing

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The Reports Division (D/R) is essentially a staff division. One of its most important functions is to help analysts turn out the best possible reports. Certain standards of good report writing do exist, and it is D/R's job to see that these standards are adhered to. D/R has no hard and fast rules, does not attempt to bring out reports in straight jackets. There is more than one way to do a good job, and the best rules are made only to be broken.

You are all familiar with ORR's research program and its history. Shortly after the reorganization which produced ORR, we worked on Task Force I, which was in effect an "inventory of ignorance". Our present research program is the outgrowth of that initial study. We will probably have changes in that program; in fact, right now we are in the process of eliminating some reports, consolidating others, and initiating new ones.

Reports should be a combination of good research plus intelligence. There are many well-written reports which are not useful, because they do not contain intelligence. Also, you must remember that you are not writing only for yourself or for your counterpart in another organization; you are writing for a reader who may not be familiar with the subject. Your report should be slanted toward an intelligent reader without technical knowledge.

The comments that follow will be of a general nature and probably somewhat disconnected. Later there will be a discussion of some of the common errors that D/R has found in the draft reports submitted thus far. This discussion may at times seem negative, but there is really no way to teach a person how to write. About all one can do is to tell a person what to do and what not to do to improve his writing. Finally, we will wind up with a brief discussion of appendixes.

An important prerequisite to good writing is an interest in the subject that you are writing about. If your attitude toward your work is positive, you can solve the problems of method, system, and organization much more readily.

You should not begin a report until you have a thorough understanding of your terms of reference. Understand what is wanted. If you do not understand what you are trying to do with the report, there is a good chance that your reader will not either. Even if you do understand, your reader will not unless you tell him.

Once you understand the terms of reference, prepare a working outline. A working outline is an important key to good report writing. It enables you to organize your thinking, your research, and your actual writing. In the absence of an outline, there is often a tendency to put everything down

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in the order in which you find it, regardless of logic and relevance. The standard commodities outline for ORR can be followed in preparing your own outline. However, slavish devotion to any particular form is neither necessary nor desirable. Indeed, you will probably change your outline many times between the time it is first developed and the time the paper is finished. At that time, the outline should be used as a table of contents for your paper.

Most of the reports received in D/R are entirely too long. Don't try to write an encyclopedia and risk dying before you reach the letter B. Admittedly, however, it is impossible to say how long a report should be. The point is that a report should be as short as possible in the light of the material available, the scope and importance of the subject, and the needs of the reader. As a rough indication, 50 to 100 pages single-spaced should be enough for the main body of the text.

There are a number of things you should watch when you are writing your report. It is a good idea to boil down introductory and historical material as much as possible. Avoid gratuitous information throughout; try to relate your information and discussion to the problem at hand. If there are to be any limitations to your report, they should be stated at the beginning. For example, tell the reader whether you are going to talk about all electron tubes or only certain electron tubes. Be careful at all times to lead the reader along; let him know exactly what you are trying to do.

Estimates appear very frequently, and they are usually subject to error. Therefore, when you give an estimate, also give an indication of its reliability. If you do not have a figure or do not know the answer, say so.

We can probably use more statistical tables than have been used in the past. When you use a table, have a "lead-in" sentence which brings the table to the reader's attention. Although it is not necessary or desirable to repeat verbally what is in the table, it is a good idea to comment on two or three of the main things brought out by the table.

Be careful about putting too much material in the main body of the report. Appendixes are a good place to put supporting material not necessary to the main flow of the argument.

One of the best ways to check yourself is to show your report to another person in your Branch or Division. In practically every case a person who comes in "cold" can make helpful suggestions about things that you cannot see because you are too close to the project. Do this as you go along; do not wait until the final draft is typed and ready for submission. Another trick is to put your writing completely aside for a week or 10 days and get it out of mind. When you return to it, you will find that you have developed a fresh point of view and in most cases will see possibilities for improvement that you did not at first notice.

At this point we will list and discuss some of the chief faults found in ORR papers submitted to date. These comments will necessarily have to be negative, in the sense that they suggest things not to do. The main faults are as follows, not necessarily in order of importance:

1. Superfluous material: Talk about your subject only; keep to the point. Do not put in material that is irrelevant.

2. Poor definition of terms: Remember that your reader is not necessarily a technical expert. Define concisely and correctly any words and phrases that are not likely to be familiar to an intelligent lay reader. Metric ton does not need definition, but magnetron does.

3. Improper subordination: Make sure that material appearing in parallel sections of your report is of approximately equal importance.

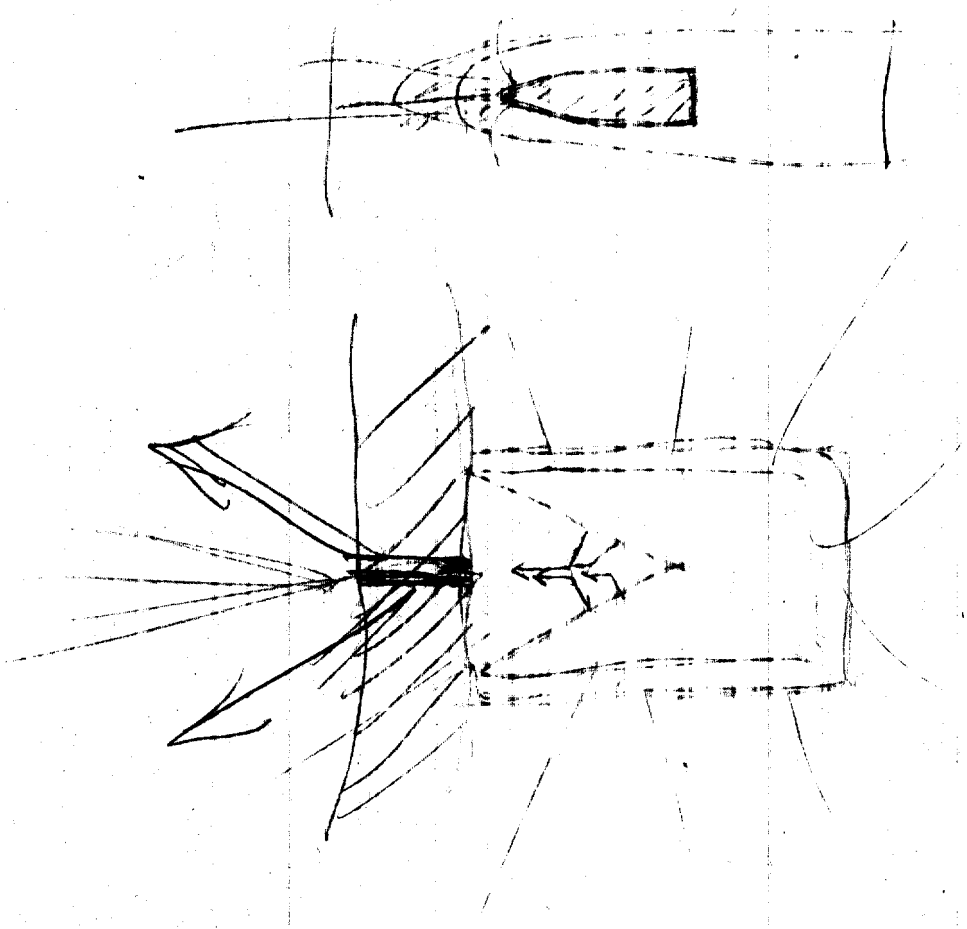
4. Unnecessary repetition: In order to make a report effective, it is often necessary to repeat. But once you have said something clearly, do not in the very next sentence say "by this I mean." If you mean it, say it in the first sentence. Perhaps the best procedure is to follow Milton's suggestion: say what you intend to say, say it, and then say what you have said. But do not say it twice and tell him twice.

5. Improper sequence: Material is often put in the wrong place in the report. Put material where the table of contents says you are going to put it, and make sure that your order of presentation is logical.

6. Overgeneralization: Often general statements are made which are not necessary to the paper. Sometimes a general statement is used to hide the lack of specific information. The fact that a statement is general does not make it correct.

7. Improper addition of figures: All calculations included in a paper are checked by D/R. Nevertheless, they should also be carefully checked by the analyst before his report is submitted. This checking is part of his job and will save time and effort in the long run.

8. Improper use of percentages: Often a percentage figure is used without any indication of amounts or numbers. A percentage means very little unless it can be related to some base figure. Also be sure that your percentages are correct. An increase from 200 to 1,000 is a 400 percent increase, not a 500 percent increase. Remember that the Russians use percentages to confuse: do not do the same thing inadvertently.



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9. Improper manipulation of figures: Apples plus oranges make a fruit salad, but 6 tons plus 5 gallons do not make anything. Make sure that when you treat several figures as a unit, you are in fact dealing with a single homogeneous thing.

10. Excessive and improper use of abbreviations: Avoid the excessive use of abbreviations. Some abbreviations are a matter of common knowledge; others are not. If you are going to use one that is unfamiliar, be sure to define it when it is first used.

11. Improper spelling of proper nouns: All names, locations, etc. included in a paper should be checked for accuracy, including accuracy of spelling. The NIS Gazetteer is our final authority. The Board on Geographic Names and the CIA Transliteration Committee are both trying to promote proper translation and transliteration and to set up a single version for use throughout the IAC agencies. If you are in any doubt, call Mr. Fisher, Ext. 2587. You will be given the proper name to use and its spelling.

12. Lack of consistency: The analyst often forgets on page 30 what he said on page 10. Be consistent with respect to ideas, facts, and the use of words.

13. Non sequiturs: Often a stated conclusion does not follow from the facts presented. Do not try to prove one point by making another.

14. Failure to coordinate graphics and tables with text: Graphics and tables should appear in their proper place in the text. The reader should be referred to this material at the appropriate point in the report.

15. Failure to check title of sources: Sometimes the analyst will blindly take down the title of a source when it is obviously incorrect. Often more than one name for the source is found; the analyst should choose the correct one and use it consistently.

A question often asked concerns the number of appendixes to be included in a report. The total number will vary greatly from paper to paper, and no general answer can be given. However, the AD/RR has directed that each report contain at least three appendixes. One is to include sources and the evaluation of sources, the second a discussion of the methodology used in the report, and the third a discussion of gaps in intelligence.

The last appendix in any report bears the title "Sources and Evaluations of Sources." In it the analyst should list all the sources used in the preparation of his report, in the same order as the material to which they relate appears in the text. If a source is used more than once it must be listed more than once. Each reference based on a source should be numbered in order of its appearance in the text and the sources will be numbered in the same order. In some cases, it will be impossible to list all the sources

used. For example, it would not be practical to show every one of the hundreds or thousands of documents found in an Industrial Register consolidation. It is permissible, in such cases, to cite the Industrial Register as the source. However, the analyst should also list some of the more important individual documents in the Register. The list of sources should be preceded by a discussion evaluating the sources used. Indicate which sources were the most valuable, the reliability of the sources, etc.

The appendix on sources serves a number of useful functions. A person who is deeply interested in the subject on which you are working will want to know what the sources were. Perhaps you had access to sources which he was not aware of or which were not accessible to him. The reader can also check your findings if he so desires by going to the original sources himself. If a new analyst comes in and takes up where you left off, he knows not only what you did but also where you got the information.

The appendix on methodology tells the reader how the paper was written. The length will vary from report to report, depending on how much methodological information you have included in the text. The reader will have a better appreciation of your work if he knows not only what your results were but also how you arrived at them. If you give the reader a complete picture of your sources and your methods, he should come up with the same conclusions that you made.

The third required appendix, on gaps in intelligence, tells the reader what the analyst does not know and could not find out. Such an appendix is extremely useful, because a reader cannot adequately evaluate or use what has been done without knowing what has not been done. This appendix is also a guide to the development of field collection requirements.

On 23 January 1952, ORR published a pamphlet entitled "Preparation and Submission of Manuscripts." This pamphlet covers many of the points made here as well as others not touched upon. It is not complete or detailed but will prove of assistance to an analyst in writing a good paper. It is expected that a revised and enlarged version will be published in the near future.